

Chapter 227: Reforging

Mercury looked at Tor-Tern. The ruler of Blood floated in the air, masses of crimson dripping off their enormous form. All three heads were twisted into furious snarls, each one's eyes sweeping through the room.

For a moment, Mercury considered stepping forward. He considered, well and truly, to burn blood to the ground. The court already had issues. It was one of the most obviously cruel ones, and it bothered him to no end.

Blood was a necessary liquid for life. It was necessary, it was healthy to have for most species, and yet this stupid blood-dragon just discarded all of that and focused on *spilling* it. What a disgusting display.

But then, he restrained himself. Right now, the rulers were in his favour. Right now, he still needed to play them. Until the courts on his side were more absolute. So he bided his time, and let others speak.

"I, too, am willing to fight," Finva of Dust said calmly. The ruler had a soft, pleasant voice, a little like a faint breeze or the crackle of embers. "Step down, Tor-Tern. Or watch as I leave red ash on your court."

"Disgusting," the ruler of Blood spat. "A broken husk like you stands up to me? None else? Cowards, the lot of you."

Then, Ciarski stood from their shadow-throne. "Oh? Then, do you want to fight me? I'm willing to go to fight, too."

"Cease this behaviour. It is unbecoming," Titania commanded.

Ciarski gave her a long look, then gently shook their head. "No, Titania. Blood has made its declaration. I have made mine. Mercury is our benefactor. This is an opportunity to show just what he has done for Shadow." Then, they smiled faintly. "It will also show that Shadow is not to be messed with."

"You dare?!" Tor-Tern snarled. "Fine, then. Let us put you in your place, filth."

Mercury watched with a bizarre bit of fascination as the ruler of Blood moved. They swelled to a massive size, blood being filtered from their body, from the world, appearing out of nowhere and forming spears and swords and cruel implements. Devices of bloodshed and killing and torture.

A flood of crimson violence incarnate instantly crashed down upon the council. Each droplet of blood was a tiny weapon, each one ready to bring devastation and carve through flesh. Cruelty, distilled into a thousand liquid weapons.

There was an aura about them, too. A bit of devastation formed a red halo around them, as Tor-Tern flowed into the wave themselves, joining it with claws and teeth.

In response, Ciarski's avatar changed.

The restrained blob of darkness opened up. It was like gazing into the deepest abyss, a lightless chasm. Mercury felt vertigo kick in, and the sense of falling. The world dimmed, and the shadows grew a little longer.

Deep down, there was a fear of height trying to grip him. Ciarski, the ruler of Shadow, turned inside out, and all at once, rather than being there, all that they left was a humanoid *void*. Instead, everywhere there hadn't been, darkness spread.

A moment later, eyes blossomed. From Mercury's shadow, from thin air, from the ground and the sky and everywhere the darkness had crept. A hundred thousand million eyes, all at once, and within each of the eyes, there were hundreds more. Pupils opened up to reveal yet more unblinking gazes.

Each stare was like a blossoming flower, turning into a thousand more, and suddenly, that wave of red seemed so small. It crashed into the void where Ciarski had been, the place that was now an inverted mirror of pure nothingness, and disappeared. Like a coin into a wishing well, it made a tiny splash, barely a ripple, and then all that violence was swallowed up.

The garden of vision bloomed further. Eyes opened in the blood, within red water suddenly growing black. In the depths of it all, the shadows spread, like an infection. Tor-Tern had touched the abyss, and now, that violence was replaced by the cold uncaring dread that darkness brought with it.

Violence and cruelty faltered in the face of raw apathy and fear.

Mercury felt his fur stand on end as his senses tingled with danger. He watched as the battle of wills unfolded, as one fey absolute clashed with another. As violence roiled against the shackles of everlasting depths. Blood against Shadow.

And it wasn't even a contest.

To give credit where credit is due, Tor-Tern fought valiantly. The blood-construct writhed and struggled and fought against the darkness. They roiled with all their fury and all their cruelty and all their desire to hurt.

But they failed.

There was a simple reason for that. Ciarski was *all* of Shadow. All the kindness, the cruelty, the everpresence of darkness, the coldness of it and the comfort. They understood it all, they embodied it all.

To compare such a full realisation of one's court to Tor-Tern's imbalance would be ridiculous. Blood was bloodshed, but it wasn't just that. When only taking violence and recklessly tossing healing aside, Tor-Tern sabotaged themselves. They were incomplete. Fractured.

Their court was shifting, but since it was in between, since the sentiment was unfulfilled, it was like fighting someone with a sword when you wielded only a hilt.

Hopeless.

Darkness crawled its way through waves of red, onto Tor-Ternn's body, and shadows grew under the surface tension that served as their skin. The abyss stretched through the other ruler like ink, watched by an infinite number of uncaring gazes.

"That will be enough," queen Titania announced with a sigh.

The eyes closed. In a moment, all of the darkness disappeared again, flower buds closing, lids shutting, and it all inverted back into that negative space.

Lightlessness was replaced by the dim environment of Nether's red wood, and Tor-Tern was left gasping for air on the floor. Kneeling.

Ciarski stood at their throne, arms behind their back, unbothered. They didn't even sneer. Simply gazed upon Tor-Tern with a look of insignificance. "You are Blood," Ciarski said. "Embody violence and get crushed under our heel."

A few more moments passed, and Tor-Tern eventually stumbled back to their throne, still shaken. Mercury saw their aura wavering. Deep within that blood, there was a seed of fear, a seed of hate, and a seed of want. They wanted that power, too. And there was only *one* avenue for that.

The ruler of Shadow, for their part, gave a small bow to Mercury, with a hand in front of their heart in such a human way. "We hope this takes care of any grievance you may have had with the fae realm as a whole. Do not measure all of us by our weakest link."

Tor-Tern seemed to flare up in anger at that, but they controlled themselves. Not a peep was heard. Instead, Mercury gave a rather glad nod. "I will try to show nuance in my judgment."

Oberon grimaced at this display. What a miserable thing to see his faction debase itself like so. But with the knowledge he had now, with the piece of himself that was grafted onto there in a gross mismatch from his usual self, he wanted to give up. He knew it was pointless. But his pride didn't allow him to give up.

Similarly, for the ruler of Blood, it was their wrath driving them. And there was a whole lot of wrath in the air. A whole... whole lot.

Mercury blinked. Something was off. Something was *very* wrong. For a moment, he focused, slipping into ihn'ar. The golden veil broke-

And the world tore.

It had been inevitable really. The fae realm was fragile and thin. It could only handle so much, and this area had experienced one too many shifts.

First, Zyl tore into its fabric. Then Mercury manifested his dream and for a moment, there were multiple layers rubbing against each other. Then, each of the rulers appeared, and their presence pressed upon reality. Now, Tor-Tern and Ciarski had fought, and the world was swallowed by blood and darkness.

The fabric of this realm was weakened. Like a cloth that had been washed and wrung dry, steamed and pulled and scratched. It was thinning, fraying, and charged with fury.

Tor-Tern and Oberon and all the others that stood against Mercury. Each oozed with anger that blazed bright enough to be a beacon to a sin.

Wrath.

What it all boiled down to was wrath. Anger, fury, hatred. The desire to break and hurt and kill. With so much fury all in one place, and that place weakened, the gate opened.

All at once, there was an eclipse. The light winked out, replaced by a dull firmament of angry, red light. It was quite similar to the blood eclipse, but rather than blood, this was a glow of violence and hurt

Mercury had killed a starving dream. The dessicated husk that had been the court of gluttony. Now, in front of him, what tore open the world and left an immovable mark on him was *wrath*.

The air tore asunder just as the veil of iridescence shattered. Rifts, gates into a wandering archway, a tunnel to another world full of violence and hurt. It blossomed and grew and nourished itself on destruction.

Creatures tore from it, ones made from sharp edges and violence. Hounds made of blades and steel. Rabid critters grafted of body parts, for the sole purpose of carving and hurting.

Instantly, one came crashing at Mercury and he found himself very *vividly* reminded that he was not unkillable. It was a small thing, about the size of a ferret, and somehow every part of its round body was a sharp edge.

It leapt at him, all fang and claws, and when he tried to swat it aside with <Force of the Hecantoncheires>, it cut that invisible hand to ribbons.

There was a flash of phantom pain and then the thing was upon him. His skin, though and leathery and reinforced by <Hydration> split before it even touched him. It was in that same way that <Itinerant> opened up a path for him before he took it, except this was an application of harm.

A surface scratch from the ball of claws and teeth would cut deep, and it already dug its teeth into him, shredding one of his shoulders to blood ribbons.

With a violent application of far, far more force and a slam of his rijn, Mercury dislodged the whirlwind of shredding blades. Blood spilled into his fur, staining the white red. His breath hitched a little, the pain digging far deeper than it had any right to.

He felt his heart palpitate wildly, shaking. What the fuck? There was a cut on it. There were cuts, tiny ones *all over him*. The aura of violence had, apparently, left its mark on his internal organs, too.

Fire burned in his veins, quickly knitting themselves back together with <Hydration>. Each touch of the creature, even through his Skills, sent phantom pain through his body. This was what a living sin could do. One that had festered and grown for aeons.

Mercury slammed into the thing with his *rijn*, choosing to use his own mind as his weapon. His willpower was his most formidable part, after all, and finally, he managed to crunch its strangely horrid body, enduring a few faint cuts on his mind.

The metal it was made from twisted, and even when Mercury flattened it into a pancake with a few blows, it still tried to writhe and bite at him. Relentless machines of destruction. And they were pouring out by the hundreds.

A moment later, luckily, Zyl was in front of him. The dragon shot him a confident smile, and blazing fire enveloped the two of them. "I'll smash them," he said. "Can you close the rift?"

Mercury thought for half a second, then nodded. He could. Probably. It didn't seem unreasonable, now that the veil of iridescence was shattered. "Got it. Keep me safe, love."

"Will do." After Zyl's words, his fist blurred, and there was the sound of crunching metal as another one of the wrath-things was reduced to a broken mess.

All of it vanished from Mercury's inner eye.

Within a moment, his focus shifted. The world around him didn't matter. The creatures and the sound and the smells didn't matter. They could all disappear from his awareness.

His mind, a finely honed tool, focussed on the fabric of this realm. On this place. And he found Rust.

Clicking his tongue, Mercury frowned. "Can't operate on the realm directly," he told Zyl. "Get me to the ruler of Rust."

"Alright," Zyl said. In a moment, he'd picked up Mercury... and before the mopaaw could even raise his voice, Zyl *tossed him*.

Mercury heard a boom as he surpassed the speed of sound, his blood rushing in his ears. He could feel his brain give out for a moment, falling unconscious from the acceleration, but his minds kept working, and a small application of <Force of the Hecatoncheires> within his own body regulated his blood pressure.

What a horrible feeling.

Then, another moment passed, and Mercury crashed into an enormous figure crafted from old, aged iron. The ruler of Rust.

Already, the construct was covered in tiny cuts, as well as bite sized missing chunks. They were weak, fragmented, slow, and not even tough. The metal bent underneath as Mercury impacted, feeling all the air knocked out of his lungs until he quickly summoned more.

The irony that he was kind of puppeteering his fragile flesh body with his Skills wasn't lost on him. Once again, he felt distinctly inhuman, but quickly abandoned that worry.

"Rust. I want to close the rift. To do so, I need to fix up your court - which means fixing up you," he said, bluntly.

A long moment passed, the silence interrupted only by the grinding of metal as Rust crushed another creature of wrath in one massive hand. The construct looked at Mercury, with a hint of longing and fear and hope. "I see."

"It's your choice to make," Mercury said. "Just make one, so I can look for other solutions if needed."

And for the first time, there was a faint bit of happiness writ upon Rust's features. "Even now, you still say it is a choice." They shook their head. "Fine then. Give me a name, Mercury."

Mercury nodded. Zyl arrived a moment later, wrapping them behind a curtain of fire. Metal crashed against it, leaving cuts upon the flickering flames before turning to molten slag. The dragon shared a quick glance with his boyfriend, and then they both nodded. Their duties were clear.

Mercury turned to look at Rust. Then, without hesitation, he <Witnessed> them.

Instantly, Mercury dove into that inner world, each zeyjn of his working at full force. He dove into <Oceanic Consciousness>, slowing down the flow of time from his perspective. It was needed - because the rips would only grow if he didn't close them now.

Moment by moment passed, and thousands of tiny facts about Rust fell into place. It was like a three dimensional puzzle - a full surgery on a living, beating heart. Bits that needed to be cut out, ones that needed to be added in an ever shifting network of perceptions and affiliations.

Gritting his teeth, Mercury focussed. He turned his mind into the tools needed. He carved away the parts that were unnecessary, the complacency, the laziness, the disjointedness between Rust and its ruler. And he added what was necessary.

Finality was tossed aside. Rot and stagnation replaced with an ever spreading, ever changing, ever growing Rust. Amusingly, in a lot of ways, that finished product, the rust itself, was the combination of a metal and a gas. And so... it was a Salt.

Mercury almost laughed as he remembered highschool chemistry and fixed it in his perception. Rust was a bridge between Skye and Salt. Water and air bonded with metals - whatever metals, really. Copper oxide was just as good as iron - and formed a salt!

He stitched the cycle into the Ruler's very being, and drew tight the web between the court and the one embodying it. They were distinct, but overlapping. Mercury fixed perceptions in place, he worked and worked away as he moved things into place.

As he worked, the world shifted. The resonance between Rust and its ruler built like an orchestra coming to a crescendo. He felt the world tremble faintly as things changed. As they came into alignment.

And finally, they snapped together like magnets, and Mercury paused.

The world lurched, snapped closed. The dimensional fabric rippled, and the frayed ends wove into one another. All at once, the starry tapestry of wrath winked out, the rifts closed over as authority consumed them.

Rust was reborn - but the operation was not yet done.

Mercury kept working, because even when things snapped into place, that was not enough. He would tolerate no less than his best, and changes were still needed. Bits of Rust that needed to be discarded, and added.

So he didn't settle. He kept working. Unknowing of the gazes that laid on him, his mind operated at a furious pace, being both the doctor and the tools, he forged as much as he stitched and wove.

And then, another few hours later, it was done.

Mercury finally sunk back into his body, covered in sweat, stumbling backwards in exhaustion. He was drained, entirely exhausted. The rust red water still covering the floor was eating away at the crumpled bodies of wrathful things, and also biting at Mercury's ankles, but he ignored it.

After a moment, there was a steadying hand on his shoulder. Zyl caught him, holding him upright. Mercury summoned more air for himself to breathe. "Done," he said.

The world around them was whole, and with how stable it was, the influence of the other rulers was suppressed. Titania, for once, didn't smell of rot. Tor-Tern was confined, no longer dripping blood. The ruler of Allure stopped shifting shapes automatically, forced into a somewhat androgynous humanoid form somewhere between pretty and handsome.

Each of them looked at the new ruler of Rust. Mercury looked, too, wanting to see the physical changes. And they were obvious.

Rather than a creature inflicted with Rust, the ruler now embraced it. The previous organised lines of the construct were replaced with organic, spiralling metal growths. Bits crumbled to red rust, fell to the ground and dissolved into the water as more, new metal grew, only to rust once again.

There was no creaking as it moved, just the whisper quiet of shifting sand. Growing spires of red decay writhed around its head like a crown of horns. All that was left was a name. "Haeth."

The word slammed into the world and resonated. The court of Rust shook, red sand dancing in the air, red water rippling and stirring as if possessed.

Heath, the ruler of Rust reborn, turned to Mercury. The fae had something like a face, one that looked as if cast from static, since the red sand on it shifted in its features. Four slanted eyes stared down at Mercury, and its mouths were made of twisting metal, falling apart and regrowing with each passing moment.

"This one expresses satisfaction," the ruler said, speaking formally. "I was afraid I would regret this, but..." they paused, squeezing a hand into a fist. "This form... suits me. As if I were what I was meant to be. Complete."

Their features twisted into a grin of shifting sand. "You have earned Rust's full support."

Nether, too, manifested next to Heath, a small avatar of wooden gears, wielding a clipboard. "Efficacy of maintenance and growth processes has increased by over 40% in the last hour. Stable population of biters reported. Individual agency has increased just under 23%. This unit is glad that you have visited this court," the avatar said with a bow to Mercury.

Ciarski smiled. "You have quite the affinity for the faerie houses, Rainfall," they teased. "Will you claim ownership of them?"

"I'd never be something as despicable as a landlord," Mercury joked with a tired smile. "What a horrid accusation that is."

The ruler of Shadow laughed. "Darkness is known to be cruel."

"Careful, I'll evict you," Mercury fired back.

Titania interrupted their banter with a booming clap. "That's quite enough of that," she said. "Mercury. This is the first time other rulers have witnessed what exactly it is you do, correct?"

Ignoring the throbbing headache in his skull and the pending Skill notifications, Mercury nodded. "Yeah, that sounds about right. It's a little different each time, too."

That was an understatement. Saying it was a little different was like calling a heart surgery and a brain surgery just a little different. Of course, similar tools were involved, and similar procedure, but they were still vastly different in terms of approach and knowledge required.

Mercury needed to, on the fly, diagnose a problem, understand the requisite spiritual anatomy, then precisely interact with it. The task was monumental - which is why it took so long, and took so much out of him. Stretching even his formidable mind to its limits was not an easy thing to do, after all.

"Very well. Your willingness to demonstrate it shall be accounted for favourably. I believe seeing the effects in practice will be quite... *enlightening* for the other courts. Who would you prefer to visit next?" she asked.

He smiled. "My bed," he said. "Then... Allure? That seems the most reasonable to me."

The queen turned to the ruler in question. "Allure. Is this acceptable for you?"

For a moment, tensions boiled high. The fae of desire, pressed into a single shape as though confined by a cage, looked at Mercury. In that gaze was a host of emotions. Fear and worry, anger and hate, and yet, desire and desperation.

Allure was fragile. Mercury saw it, then and there. The fae was the closest, out of them all, to breaking into a thousand pieces. Trickery mixed into false promises create half-baked feelings. Addiction, rather than open choice. Manufactured want.

But still, the ruler hesitated. Because there was terror. So much fear, that they would lose what they stood for, lose who they were. So, Mercury said what he had told Rust before. "This will always be your choice. I won't make you go through with it. All I will do is visit, and watch. So I can be prepared in case you do want to go through with things."

Another few seconds passed, Allure giving him a nervous glance. All Mercury could spare was tired lethargy, but he hoped it was some comfort. They truly did seem troubled. He hoped they'd want help, but he wouldn't force it. No way to help someone who didn't want it.

If Allure decided to die a slow death, then he wouldn't force them into being something else.

"Fine," they eventually said. "You may visit our court."

Oberon gave them a dirty glare. He was rapidly losing his supporters. Mercury, for his part, just nodded. "Alright. There's a chance one of the broken thrones causes trouble beforehand. If that's the case, I'll be relying on your help to keep them calm so I can knit them back together. Ah, with that I mean any rulers who want me to help the realm. Otherwise, I might cause more damage than required, and I'd rather hate that."

Then, he gave a wave. "Anyway. Off to bed for me." He yawned. "Show's over, time to head home. ... Ah. Nether, can you uhm, fix my door?"

"Affirmative," the ancient one said, and the wood of his door knitted itself back together where Oberon had smashed it.

Mercury jumped into his hammock, soon accompanied by Zyl, and instantly fell asleep.